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SUBJECT: LIBERIA: PRESIDENT TURNS TO YOUNG TECHNOCRATS FOR NEW ECONOMIC TEAM

REF: MONROVIA 591

¶1. (U) President Sirleaf has promoted Liberia Reconstruction and Development Committee (LRDC) Coordinator Natty B. Davis to Minister of State Without Portfolio to oversee overall coordination of economic policy. She also has nominated two young American-educated officials to build her new economic team. The Finance Minister-designate, Augustine Ngafuan, is currently Director of the Bureau of the Budget. Amara Konneh, nominated as Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs, was previously Deputy Minister of State for Communications and Public Affairs. Both nominees signal a commitment to diversity, as Ngafuan is a Gbandi and Konneh is a Muslim Mandingo. Other appointments, including a new Minister of Commerce, are expected shortly.

¶2. (SBU) Reception to the nominations has been positive, with concerns about the new Ministers' age balanced by recalling the President's promise that she would bring the next generation into government. Both Ngafuan and Konneh are extremely well-respected, worked on Sirleaf's campaign, and have recently returned from studies at Harvard University. Ngafuan's ability to take on the entrenched interests at Finance is still an open question but in our discussions with him last week (reftel) he provided us a detailed rundown of what he views as the major problem areas. During our conversation he showed a sharp understanding of the importance of improving internal operations and reducing opportunities for rent-seeking.

¶3. (U) Included in the announcement was the nomination of Nathaniel Barnes, currently Liberia's Permanent Representative at the United Nations, who has been nominated as Ambassador to the United States. (Note: The USG has already granted agreement. End note.) In pro-forma changes, Amos Sawyer was named Chairman of the Governance Commission, successor organization to the Governance Reform Commission, which he currently heads. Betty Saway was re-nominated to the board of the Central Bank of Liberia. All except Saway require Senate confirmation.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: We had been told the President is aiming for a more balanced and well-coordinated economic team. Former finance minister Antoinette Sayeh was a tour de force in the government, and her departure has temporarily taken the wind out of the government's economic sails. Natty B. Davis, currently coordinator of the Liberia Reconstruction and Development Committee (LRDC), has some qualities Sayeh lacked, most notably an ability to build consensus within the government and to interact with the Legislature. Davis' promotion to Minister of State Without Portfolio will allow him to coordinate GOL economic policies. Ngafuan's intentions to improve operations at MOF should complement our efforts, from improving tax administration to streamlining customs and the port. It is likely his appointment reflects the President's realization that internal housekeeping is necessary if poverty reduction initiatives are to succeed. Although she has indicated she intends to eliminate the Ministry of Planning, it would require legislation that is a long way off, and Konneh will be a strong team player with a solid background who will not block any future reorganization.

End comment.

15. (U) Biographic information

-- Augustine Kpehe Ngafuan

Currently Director of the Bureau of the Budget, Ngafuan signals a change of emphasis at MOF. His predecessor, Antoinette Sayeh, was an internationally-known official who brought tremendous energy, experience and focus to tackling debt relief and launching the affiliated Poverty Reduction Strategy. Ngafuan, based on our recent discussions with him, will focus much more on improving the internal operations of the Ministry of Finance (reftel).

Augustine Ngafuan was born in 1970 in Lofa County. He graduated from the Booker Washington Institute (BWI) in 1989 and studied accounting, earning a Bachelor's degree in 1998. While a student at the University of Liberia, Ngafuan became President of the University of Liberia Students Union. Liberians still associate him with his leadership during his student days.

Upon graduation in 1998, Ngafuan was drafted by the Central Bank of Liberia upon its formation in 1999 to serve as Assistant Head of Domestic Banking. Ngafuan was awarded a scholarship by the Central Bank of Liberia to study Accounting at the University of Rochester in the United States. Upon his return to Liberia in 2004, Ngafuan was appointed Head of International Banking, a position he occupied until his appointment in 2006 as Budget Director by President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. The BOB has been a GEMAP success story and Ngafuan has been a strong proponent and example of greater government

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transparency.

Ngafuan was an official of the Sirleaf campaign in 2005. He is married and has two children. Ngafuan is honoring a long-standing invitation to speak at the Embassy's cultural evening August 7, where he will be reading and discussing his poetry.

Ngafuan is an ethnic Gbandi and his family is from Lofa County.

-- Amara Konneh, currently Deputy Minister of State for Communications and Public Affairs, has been nominated as Minister of Planning and Economic Affairs. Konneh lived in the United States from 1990 until 2005, when he returned to Liberia and worked on the Johnson-Sirleaf campaign. His polling expertise is considered a foundation of her victory. Several in the Embassy have worked closely with him over the past years and have a very favorable impression.

He was appointed Deputy Minister of State for Public Affairs and Communication by President Sirleaf in 2006. Konneh resigned the post in 2007 to attend Harvard University where he received a Master's degree in public policy and management in June 2008. He had previously obtained a Master's degree in management information systems from Pennsylvania State University, a Bachelor's degree in information systems from Drexel University, and an Associate degree in business administration from Delaware County Community College. Konneh is a Muslim and a member of the Mandingo ethnic group.

ROBINSON